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Identity Crisis in JhumpaLahiri's *The Namesake*

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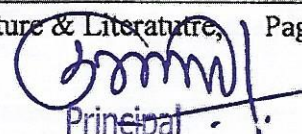
Abstract:

The present paper is an effort to understand the conflicts before the second generation of Indian Diaspora with special reference to *The Namesake* by JhumpaLahiri. Having been born of educated middle class Bengali parents in London and grown up in Rhodes Island, Lahiri authentically portrays her diasporic experiences in her first novel *The Namesake*. In this novel Lahiri's experiences of growing up as a child of immigrants resemble that of her protagonist, Gogol Ganguly. Lahiri belongs to the second generation of Indian Diaspora whose ongoing quest for identity never seems to end. They feel sandwiched between the country of their parents and the country of their birth. They are to maintain ties between the ideologies of these two countries which are poles apart. But in this process they are caught between acute identity crisis from where there is now hereto go. Lahiri finds herself quite a stranger to both of the countries - in India she is an American and in America she is an Indian.

Key words: alienation, culture, identity, immigrant, self- identity, delima

Introduction:

JhumpaLahiri is one of the very important novelists in American English literature, mainly as diasporic writer. JhumpaLahiri struggle lots for self indienty in her own life. Her struggles and experiences are directly reflected in the first novel *The Namesake*. It also explores many of the emotional and cultural themes. *The Namesake* is about this perpetual dilemma faced by immigrants as they struggle to maintain their identities while trying to shake them off at the same time. "The first generation's story was about adaptation and learning a culturing and also discovering new things about themselves. The second generation finds itself presented with two conflicting realities and cultures and sets of expectations - one of the host countries through the socio-cultural surroundings and the other of the home country through their parents. Whereas the parents maintain ties with their home country and try hard to inculcate in their children reverence for the values of the home country, the children are fascinated more by their peer groups and the society at large of the host country, which, of course was no longer a host country for them, but the country of their birth. But the country of their birth also does not accept them entirely and they keep struggling for cultural identity which sways between two countries. Parents talk of shared history which stresses oneness. But cultural identity lies not only in oneness but in "critical points of deep and significant difference


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which constitute what we really are; or rather – since history has intervened – what we have become.”

Gogol's Identity Crisis

Through Gogol, Lahiri presents identity crisis which she herself has faced acutely. She contradicts the idiom “What's in a name?” Rather she is obsessed with ‘it's everything that matters in a name.’ Name signifies the first identity. But this identity gets a blow when it comes to the second generation of Indian Diaspora. The paper intends to explore the conflicts which arise due to different cultural practices before the children of Indian parentage. Jhumpa Lahiri was born as Nilanjana Sudeshna, but had one pet name, Jhumpa which was found easy to pronounce by her teacher and she became Jhumpa Lahiri. She felt embarrassed whenever she was called as Jhumpa. She struggled a lot to make herself feel an American but she found just a half-way feeling. The same feeling she puts into Gogol who never likes to be called by this name. The agony felt by Gogol is the agony of Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri's parents, like the whole first generation of Diaspora, were always isolated from mainstream American Culture. Despite the fact that they spoke English, they were betrayed by their accent. They feel alone and aloof there. Lahiri has shown all this through various conflicts presented in *The Namesake*. Gogol's name is one of the chief causes which make him feel alienated. His loneliness starts from the moment he enters the world. His mother thinks to herself - “She has never known a person entering the world so alone”. After his birth, selecting a name becomes a problem for them. The difference between the naming process in Indian and American cultures pushes him into a chaos. Ashima wants her grandmother to suggest a name but the name is not received, the letter having been lost in transit. The hospital authorities do not allow them to leave the hospital without naming the new born, in keeping with the rules. Ashok names him Gogol after the name of his beloved Russian author, Nikolai Gogol, thinking of it as a pet name only, which is a common practice in India.

The Question of Identity:

In the postcolonial discourse, the question of identity plays a vital role. The problem of Gogol's name symbolizes the problem of his identity. He wants to be connected to the strange names in the graveyard. He wants to relate himself with Nikhil replaces Gogol when he enters Yale as a freshman. Here nobody knows his earlier name. He feels relief and confident. Here starts his transformation. He starts doing many activities which he could not dare to do as Gogol. But a new dilemma encircles him. He changes his name but “he does not feel like Nikhil” (105). He fears to be discovered. With the rejection of Gogol's name, Lahiri rejects the immigrant identity nurtured by his parents. But this outward change fails to give him inner satisfaction. “After eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feels scant, inconsequential.” He hates everything that reminds him of his past and heritage. The loss of the old name was not so easy to forget and when alternate weekends, he visits his home “Nikhil evaporates and Gogol claims him again.” He tries to put a wall between his past and his present, but it is not easy.

Effort at Blending in – Leading Nowhere:

Gogol desires to blend in the American society. He wants to live unnoticed. But he is not viewed as an American by other Americans, even though he is a native born citizen. He tries to put a wall between his past and his present but it is not easy. The adoption of ‘Nikhil’ is a part to live only in the present, but the ghost of Gogol clings to him that he signs his old name unconsciously, he does not respond immediately when he is addressed as Nikhil. He tries to

become an entirely different person from what really he is. Gogol struggles to carry the burden of two names. Nikhil resembles American names, yet 'Gogol' and his past follow him everywhere. He experiences a feeling of being in-between. He is considered an 'ABCD' "America-Born Confused Desi" But he considers himself an American. American society says, "But you're Indian". Gogol is an outsider in American society whereas he does not feel intimacy with Indianans. So 'who he is' becomes a great problem. What determines identity? Is it the name, which can be the very first factor in the formation? Even after making all efforts to erase his past, his failure to assert his identity is seen in his relationship with women. He does not want Ruth or Maxine to meet his parents. Such efforts are made to escape his past identity and heritage. The death of his father brings great change in him. He learns that he cannot abandon or diminish the importance of either culture but must learn to mesh the two together. He realizes that his identity is embellished by both cultures and comes to know "identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" (Hall 10). He does not have to be one or the other; he does not have to choose. He is made up of both and it should strengthen his pride instead of weakening it. He feels no shame. He has assimilated himself in American culture and values, at the same time retaining his parents' Indian heritage and now proud of his name 'Nikhil Gogol Ganguly' and all it means. He tries to cope up with the situation to gain a new identity which does not need a particular nationality and hence different from the old one. So there start a journey "to rediscover his roots, his self, his hyphenated identity and to revitalize in the between of cultures, the alternate culture. He actively participates in the formation of his new and ever-widening identification. Thus it is not the name only which determines identity. Cultural hybridism is the other aspect which has a telling effect on his identity. He belongs to many cultures at once and identity may not be determined by national boundaries only. As locations change, identity can also change. One must not be excessively obsessed with one's cultural legacy, because it is not something meaningless; rather, it is deep rooted in one's collective psyche. Fanon argued that the first step for 'colonized' people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past". Identity is not just who I am. It's not all about certain sex, race, age, job and family.

Conclusion:

These words just provide a framework within which one exists. Identity is not stable and unitary rather it is multiple and ever-widening. It is the past only, which with the present prepares a way to the future.

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